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Testimony to the
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan – The First Major Projects
July 22, 2004

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Costello, members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Audubon of Florida, a state office of the National Audubon Society, thank you for the opportunity to present our views regarding the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan – The First Major Projects. Audubon has had a presence in the Everglades for more than a century, and has been actively engaged on the science and policy of Everglades restoration from more than a decade.

Florida's Congressional delegation merits appreciation for its commitment to Everglades restoration. We recognize Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart for his leadership and commitment, as well as Congressman Mark Foley and Congressman Alcee Hastings. We want to especially acknowledge Congressman E. Clay Shaw's vision, courage, and determination in championing the historic legislation designed to restore the South Florida ecosystem. Finally, we are ever grateful to Senator Bob Graham for his enduring leadership on the Everglades.

In the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2000, Congress directed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to restore the South Florida ecosystem[1] using the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) as the framework, beginning with an initial suite of project authorizations. The purpose of our testimony is to support authorization of the Indian River Lagoon – South and the Picayune Strand (formerly Southern Golden Gate) Restoration Projects, critical components of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), as the second suite of authorizations.

These projects are needed to fulfill the Congressional directive to "restore, preserve, and protect the South Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region."[2] We note that the measure of success of Everglades restoration is bringing back abundant wildlife, that economic prosperity and quality of life depend on sustainable ecosystems, and that partnerships between branches of government and the inclusion of stakeholders are necessary for success. Both the Indian River Lagoon and Picayune Strand Restoration CERP Projects demonstrate each of these tenets.

Wildlife & Natural Habitat

It is often noted that the decline of the once widespread flocks of wading birds was the first sign that the Everglades ecosystem was threatened. Birdlife still serves as an indicator of ecological health, and a principal measure of success for the South Florida/Everglades system is the return of abundant bird populations. The South Florida Greater Everglades, a subtropical ecosystem, has the highest biological diversity value of any similarly sized area in the continental United States.

[1] Congress defined "South Florida Ecosystem" as "consisting of the land and water within the boundary of the South Florida Water Management District" and "the contiguous near-shore coastal water of South Florida."
[2] WRDA 2000.

Recognized as a wetland of international significance, the Everglades is home to some of the world's most distinctive plants and animals including 69 federally listed endangered or threatened species and 29 candidate species. It is also a flyway for millions of migratory songbirds.

Everglades restoration will repair much of the damage from drainage and development, bringing back the wading birds that once filled the South Florida landscape and restoring hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands and estuarine habitat. Restoration projects will benefit federal and Florida conservation lands totaling nearly 3.5 million acres and contribute to South Florida's ecosystem-based economy.

Restoration promises to recreate, maximize, and protect a healthy, self-sustaining mosaic of ecological communities that mirrors the unique diversity of the historic Everglades ecosystem. This involves protecting and expanding the current spatial extent of South Florida's natural ecosystems, restoring lost habitat types, reestablishing connections among ecological communities to reduce fragmentation, and creating buffer zones between developed and natural areas. Restoration of land to more natural conditions will be accomplished by reestablishing sustainable populations of native plants and animals; maximizing the connections among ecological communities; removing invasive, non-native plants and animals; and reducing nuisance native species to the extent that they do not affect the Everglades ecosystem.

Everglades Restoration: Critical Steps in 2004

Two crucial components of the South Florida ecosystem -- Indian River Lagoon and Picayune Strand -- are at risk due to encroaching urban development, escalating costs, and impending estuarine collapse. Like other components of the CERP, these projects are largely an attempt to repair previous damage by federal and state projects. Unless Congress authorizes these projects this year, there is a risk that key aspects of Everglades restoration will become unattainable.

These projects have the most potential to immediately enlarge the spatial extent of the remaining Everglades. These vital areas could provide impressive ecological benefits by 2012, including: 170,000 acres of restored wetland habitat for more than 2,200 species, at least 35 of which are threatened or endangered; tens of millions of dollars in associated economic and quality of life benefits annually; and improved water flows for the Everglades, Florida Bay, Ten Thousand Islands, St. Lucie Estuary, and Lake Okeechobee.

Indian River Lagoon South: Ultimately, the Indian River Lagoon Project, pending Congressional action, will reverse the ecologically and economically devastating effects of the C&SF Project as currently configured, restore a nationally significant and unique system and the most diverse estuary in North America, and help to restore Lake Okeechobee. Restoring wetlands and retaining flows now harming the Indian River Lagoon, will recreate more than 100,000 acres of healthy habitat; help provide an estimated $731 million annual regional economic contribution from tourism, fishing, and real estate; and help prevent fish kills such as occurred in June 2002.

Of particular note is *Natural Storage and Treatment*, restored natural areas clustered in large greenways around existing state conservation lands determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as critically important to survival of listed species. *Natural Storage* also provides flood protection, water cleansing, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, and extensive recreation opportunities. Additionally, this component has low continuing energy cost and is virtually damage proof in natural disasters. It allows landowners options for purchase or easement and makes possible the integration of federal farm conservation programs.

Picayune Strand: The Picayune Strand Restoration Project will restore more than 70,000 acres of habitat. At the edge of the Big Cypress Swamp and Fakahatchee Strand sits the "Southern Golden Gate Estates" subdivision, platted by long-defunct land development schemes. This project will restore the Picayune Strand, re-establish natural sheet flow to the Ten Thousand Islands (part of Everglades National Park), and restore ecological connectivity of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, the Belle Meade State Conservation and Recreation Lands Project Area, and the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve. These restoration benefits are too long overdue and critically needed. The state has already made tremendous progress on this project by acquiring with state and federal funds virtually all of the land necessary for restoration to begin.

Everglades Restoration is Essential to South Florida's Sustainability

Ecological restoration will complement and enhance our economy and quality of life. South Florida is an international, commercial, agricultural, fisheries and tourism center with a growing population reflecting ethnic, economic, and social diversity. The region's diverse populations have one thing in common: dependence on a fully functioning Everglades for an adequate fresh water supply. The waters of the Everglades system recharge the Biscayne aquifer, southeast Florida's sole source of drinking water. This fresh water supply is vital to a healthy and sustainable economy, and overall quality of life. Simply put, restoration of the Everglades is the only way to ensure a continuous, sufficient quantity of water for a sustainable South Florida ecosystem.

The recognition that the environment, the economy, and society are intrinsically interdependent evolved from the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida ("Commission"), which was created in 1994 to serve as a voice for the many state agencies and stakeholders. The Commission was a broad-based stakeholder body charged with developing consensus recommendations for a sustainable South Florida. One of the Commission's first findings was that South Florida, on its present course, is not sustainable."[3] As a result of these findings, the urgency of Everglades restoration became apparent. In partnership with the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, the Commission crafted and unanimously adopted the *Conceptual Plan for the C&SF Project Restudy*, adopted by Congress in WRDA 1996 as the framework for CERP.[4] Many business and civic groups have ratified the Commission's ideas.

According to the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce:

> *The economy and the high quality of life residents and visitors currently enjoy hinges on the successful restoration of the Everglades. There is no greater example of the interrelationships between society, the economy, and natural environment than South Florida. National and international precedents for resolving the complex issues of sustainability, restoration and conservation will be set through restoration of our nation's most endangered and unique habitat.*[5]

[3] Initial Report (October 1, 1995).
[4] Water Resources Development Act of 1996.
[5] Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, Partners for Progress and Sustainability: The Everglades and the South Florida Business Community (June 1999).

Partnership is the Key to Success

The very idea of Everglades restoration is based on collaboration and partnerships between environmental, social, tribal, and economic interests, and between the many levels of government representing the public and taxpayers. The Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida, which crafted the consensus framework for Everglades restoration, was dissolved in May 1999, but the stakeholders – the business, agricultural, and conservation communities – have remained committed to achieving our common goals as outlined first in the Conceptual Plan and adopted into the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. The work of the Commission resulted in an unparalleled sense of reciprocal trust and common commitment.

Unprecedented Federal/State Partnership

The 50/50 partnership between the federal government and the State of Florida for all aspects of Everglades restoration is unprecedented. This partnership between America and Florida on these projects will contribute significant improvements to the Everglades and our nation's natural resources. The Everglades is a model for future environmental restoration projects, reversing the unforeseen consequences of a decades-old Corps project as equal partners with the state. To reiterate the insightful words of Senator Bob Graham, "Everglades restoration depends on a strong federal-state partnership in which each partner needs to have trust and respect for the other."[6]

Securing Lands Needed for Restoration

The integrity of the CERP rests in part on the ability to acquire the land necessary to implement project components. Congress has appropriated nearly $300 million for Everglades lands, including Picayune Strand. The State of Florida and the South Florida Water Management District have already expended nearly $1 billion to secure CERP lands. Additionally, the State of Florida has committed to providing an additional $500 million over the remainder of the decade.

Table. CERP Land Acquisition Status[7]

CERP Land Acquisition	Acres Acquired	% Acquired	Estimated Cost	Remaining Cost
Indian River Lagoon	31,000	25%	$116 Million	$400 Million
Picayune Strand	55,000	99%	$100 Million	N/A
Total CERP	200,000	50%	$1.02 Billion	$1.28 Billion

There is a race against development to purchase these lands and not lose irreplaceable benefits. While significant progress has been made, the pressures of price escalation and development increase every day – by as much as 40% annually – and will rob us of this historic opportunity if we do not move expeditiously to buy land and approve and build the projects authorized by CERP.

Indian River Lagoon and Picayune Strand Restoration are vital components of the overall CERP. Local support is strong evidence that the US Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District have been interactive and responsive to citizens' needs and concerns. These projects are models to be followed by the Corps and the South Florida Water Management District as they develop CERP projects for implementation, working together with stakeholders.

[6] Conference Rep. on H.R. 2466, Dept. of Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2000 (October 20, 1999).
[7] Source: South Florida Water Management District, CERP Master Land Acquisition Tracking Chart (December 31, 2003).

Restoration Has Already Begun

Both the federal and state partners have demonstrated commitment to early restoration benefits for the Indian River Lagoon and Picayune Strand. October 16, 2003 was an historic day. Governor Bush, joined by federal, tribal, and environmental partners, broke ground on an initial phase of Picayune Strand Restoration, which includes removing roads and exotic plants, and backfilling seven miles of Prairie Canal. As part of a joint commitment to restore the River of Grass, the state and federal governments invested nearly $100 million to acquire more than 19,000 lots in the abandoned subdivision. On November 7, 2003, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, along with other federal, state, and local officials and environmental partners, broke ground on the Ten Mile Creek Water Preserve Area (WPA) Critical Restoration Project (WRDA 1996), marking the beginning of the restoration of the Indian River Lagoon Basin.

Conclusion

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, we urge Congress to fulfill the promise of Everglades restoration by authorizing on schedule Indian River Lagoon South and Picayune Strand CERP projects so that the pressures of exploding growth do not rob us of this historic opportunity. These projects provide the earliest ecological and economic value for the investment that Florida's and America's taxpayers are making in this historic restoration effort. This kind of early success is essential to maintaining the broad support CERP now enjoys from both the public and private sectors. Moving forward requires prompt Congressional approval.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is an outstanding example of the Corps repairing damage from previous water resource projects while functioning in a manner that is responsive, accountable, and fiscally responsible. The Corps has set about to undo the damage wrought by a half-century of civil works projects that diked and drained the Everglades and each day continue to divert up to two billion gallons of life-giving water away from the Everglades and out to sea. In Everglades restoration, the Corps has demonstrated public accountability by conducting extensive public outreach and remaining extremely open and accessible throughout the process.

If we fulfill this promise, the restored Everglades will serve as a model for future ecosystem restoration projects throughout our nation and the world. We greatly appreciate this opportunity to provide the Subcommittee with our views on the Everglades, and are committed to continuing to work with you toward the restoration of America's Everglades.

> *Perhaps even in this last hour, in a new relation of usefulness and beauty, the vast, magnificent, subtle and unique region of the Everglades may not be utterly lost.*
>
> -Marjory Stoneman Douglas